MEMBERS OF GURU KA LANGAR, AN INFORMAL GROUP OF FRIENDS FROM TORONTO, AT THE 'FREEDOM CONVOY'. PHOTO: JASKANWAL SINGH

VICE News

# They're Targeted by Canada's Far-Right. So Why Did They Join the 'Freedom Convoy'?

One critic said Sikhs are being used as "token" representation by the primarily white "freedom convoy".

By Pallavi Pundir
JAKARTA, ID

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Before heading out, Jaskanwal Singh packs samosas, the quintessential South Asian spicy puff pastry, and chai at his home in Canada. He loads them up in his car and joins a group of 14 Sikh Canadians like him in

VICE World News. On Instagram, he posts photos of what looks like a revolution—him holding the Sikh and Canadian flags—and poetry talking about "staring down tyranny."

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The "freedom convoy" started three weeks ago as a response to Canada's federal vaccine mandate for truckers crossing into the U.S. from Canada. In fact, 90 percent of truckers are vaccinated. The convoy quickly snowballed into a movement about all vaccine regulations and a number of other complaints, including demands that the government resign.

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Canada's 500,000 Sikhs make up only 1.4 percent of the country's 38.3 million population but about half of them are truckers. Manan Gupta, who runs *Road Today*, Canada's magazine for South Asian truckers, told *The Quint* that even though some 20 percent of truckers in Canada are South Asians, very few of them are at the protests. In fact, most Canadian residents do not support the convoy, and are even counter-protesting in some places.

despite a track record of hate crimes against Sikhs by far-right activists, who are now leading the convoy. Protesting Sikhs say they're taking part in the convoy because of their lack of faith in COVID-19 vaccines and pandemic restrictions.

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"We're finally here to stand up for our rights," Jaskanwal, the 32-year-old second-generation Sikh Canadian said. "It feels wonderful."

At the Toronto protest, Jaskanwal and his friends hand out samosas and chai to the protesters from a table surrounded by anti-vax signs. They call themselves Guru Ka Langar, a name borrowed from a traditional community service that is a cornerstone of the Sikh faith.

SIKHS WHO SUPPORT THE 'FREEDOM CONVOY' HANDING OUT SAMOSAS AT THE PROTEST SITE. PHOTO: JASKANWAL SINGH

On Monday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked the Emergencies Act, for the first time in the country's history, to handle the protest. "It is no longer a lawful protest at a disagreement over government policy. It is now an illegal occupation. It's time for people to go home," he said at a media conference.

The Anti-Hate Network, a Canadian watchdog, pointed out how the crowdfunded protest, which has raised millions, is being backed by prominent people from the far-right.

On Jan. 30, as the convoy marched towards the Canadian capital Ottawa's Parliament Hill, a few protesters were seen waving flags bearing Nazi symbols and the Confederate flag. Patrick King, who has a history of posting white supremacist and anti-semitic content, is one of the convoy's main organizers.

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ANYA ZOLEDZIOWSKI

But for Jaskanwal, the problematic events are background noise.

“This is a deliberate attempt to create a perception that we don’t know what we’re doing and that we’ve ruined society,” he said, adding that the problematic visuals like the Nazi flags were a “plant.”



MEMBERS OF 'GURU KA LANGAR' HOLD CANADIAN AND SIKH FLAGS TO SUPPORT THE 'FREEDOM PROTEST'. PHOTO: JASKANWAL SINGH

"[We are] about making free choices, and freeing ourselves from coercion so that we're not scared of losing our jobs." The issue is not just about being anti-vaccine, he added, saying vaccine mandates have "divided" the Canadian society between the vaxxed and unvaxxed.

Jaskaran Sandhu, a Canadian Sikh lawyer who runs the news outlet *Baaz* and is on the board of the World Sikh Organisation, told VICE World News that as opposed to reports of Sikhs being represented in a big way at the Freedom Convoy, they're actually a minority in a primarily "white" movement.

"At the height of the protest, which is the day they marched to Parliament Hill, I personally met many of them. These numbers are debatable and can fluctuate, but in a sea of tens of thousands of protesters, Sikhs made up no more than 100," he said.

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The reason Sikhs grabbed more attention, Sandhu added, was because they stood out, especially the ones with turbans.

Last week, Jagmeet Singh, a Sikh and leader of Canada's socialist party the New Democratic Party, called for action against the protesters and

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But Kuljeet Singh, a second-generation Sikh-Canadian studying medicine in Toronto, defended the "freedom convoy" and told VICE World News that leaders like Jagmeet do not represent them all.

Kuljeet added that unlike the scenes from Jan. 30, he’s yet to see any aggression at the protest. “I’ve been hugged more times in the past three weeks, than I have in my 34 years on earth.”



A SUPPORTER BRAVES −25C (−13F) WEATHER AT THE ‘FREEDOM CONVOY’ IN OTTAWA, CANADA. PHOTO: DAVE CHAN / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The participation of Sikhs in the convoy has aroused the curiosity of many, especially with Canada’s track record of hate crimes against minorities including Sikhs by far-right activists, who are now leading the convoy. On Monday, Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson, known for his anti-immigration stance and COVID-19 conspiracy theories, did a segment that featured Sikhs at the convoy.

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Another point of curiosity also stems from the comparisons being made between the “freedom convoy” and the global farmers’ protest that launched in India in August 2020. Those protests were led by mostly Sikh farmers against controversial farming laws that would leave them at the mercy of big businesses.

Hundreds of thousands of Sikh farmers in their tractors camped outside the Indian capital Delhi for nearly two years until the Indian government repealed the laws in November.

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ANYA ZOLEDZIOWSKI

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In Canada, the scenes of the trucks blockading the Canadian borders bear some resemblance to the tractors used by Indian farmers.

And just like the farmers in India, who offered prayers and did sewa (community service that is part of the Sikh faith) before setting out, Kuljeet, the medical student, and his friends, offered prayers before joining the convoy. “We prayed that the truckers are victorious as well,” he said.

JASKANWAL SINGH (LEFT) POSES WITH HIS FRIEND IN A CAR WITH A "SUPPORT FARMERS" SIGN, REFERRING TO INDIA'S FARMERS' PROTESTS. PHOTO: JASKANWAL SINGH

Sandhu said that comparisons of the two events are lazy. “In India, the farmer’s protest was made up of only farmers, while truckers are not at the forefront of the “freedom convoy’. In fact, trucker associations have denounced it saying trucker issues have been hijacked,” he said.

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Kuljeet joined the protest because of his anti-vaccination stance. But his motivation also comes from his Sikh heritage, historically known to be warriors. "We Sikhs take great pride in the history of our gurus, warrior-hood and standing against what's wrong. We put on our shields, pick up our swords, and run forward. And we fight for others too," he said.

Jaskanwal and Kuljeet paint a picture of revelry at the protest. There are reports of protesters firing up the barbecue grill, setting up bouncy castles for kids, and some even playing hockey. "We see so much love," said Kuljeet. He recounted his first day when he met protesters from the Canadian province Quebec, who reached out to the Sikh protesters saying, "The warriors are here."

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TIM HUME

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Jaskanwal said he has met many South Asians at the protest.

KULJEET SINGH WITH HIS PROTEST SIGN AT THE 'FREEDOM CONVOY'. PHOTO: JASKANWAL SINGH

Gagan Singh, the spokesperson for the United Truckers Association in British Columbia, told a news outlet that the “freedom convoy” doesn’t figure among key issues for truckers, unlike safety and pay structure. Kulpreet Singh, a resident of British Columbia and the founder of the South Asian Mental Health Alliance, opened a fundraiser to support “Canada’s real, struggling truckers” and has been tweeting about actual truckers getting impacted by the blockades. “Tell me again how the convoy cares about the truckers?” he tweeted.

Truckers stuck at #Michigan - #Ontario border 1 wk ago due to Sarnia convoy.

Truckers stuck at #Washington - #BC border today due to #SurreyBC convoy.

Tell me again how the convoy supports truckers??

12:03 PM · Feb 15, 2022

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Sandhu expresses concerns that "freedom convoy" Sikhs are being used as "tokens" to project an image of diversity. "They're being used as a PR shield by people who have historically not spoken in favour of Sikhs, directly or indirectly," he said.

He warns his community members: "Be careful of what their real intentions are."

*Follow Pallavi Pundir on Twitter.*

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